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Idaho—Its Meaning, Origin and Application.

By

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Idaho—Its Meaning, Origin and Application.

By JOHN E. REES.

Considerable speculation has been indulged and much thought expended regarding the word "IDAHO"; its origin, meaning and the manner in which it came to be applied. Other writers have expressed opinions and published their knowledge concerning this word or name, creating rather an extensive literature on the subject; while both the wise and the otherwise have guessed at its meaning. My object in this article is an endeavor to assemble this information and offer an explanation of the word from the light of other facts perhaps not yet known and at any rate not yet published. These, it seems to me, will give a fairly good interpretation of the word.

"Idaho" has been so nicely explained and elaborated so profusely by the poetical and idealist, that Idahoans feel proud of a name which signifies such a noble and expressive thought as the "Gem of the Mountains"; and whatever the word may have originally meant, this is its meaning to us now, and one not to be now molested. It is not my wish or purpose in this article to disturb this meaning nor to detract one iota from its inspiring sentiment, but simply to offer a version of the matter, for history's sake, from my knowledge of the Shoshoni Indian language, gained by forty years' residence near the Lemhis, one division of the Shoshoni tribe and among whom I was Indian trader for fifteen years.

"Idaho" is a Shoshoni Indian exclamation. The expression from which the word is derived is heard repeated as often, perhaps, in a Shoshoni Indian camp, in the early part of the morning, as is heard the English expression, "It's sun up," repeated in the home following the early dawn. The word is contracted from a meaning which requires much writing to correctly express it in English. Those who are used to trans-

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lating languages readily understand the difficulties of this labor, which at times becomes almost an impossible task. The word "Idaho" consists of three component parts, each of which must be analyzed to correctly understand its derivation and the idea thereby conveyed. The first is "Ee," which in English conveys the idea of "coming down." This syllable is the basis of such Shoshoni words as mean "raining," "snowing," etc., which words when properly translated would be, "water coming down," "snow coming down," etc. The second syllable is "Dah," which is the Shoshoni stem or root for both "sun" and "mountain," the one being as eternal and everlasting to the Indian mind as is the other. The third syllable, "How," denotes the exclamation and stands for just the same thing in Indian as the exclamation mark (!) does in the English language. The Shoshoni word is "Ee-dah-how," and the Indian thought thus conveyed when literally translated into English means, "Behold! the sun coming down the mountain."

The mere word does not indicate much, for it is composed of simple syllables, the significance of which requires pages of written English to correctly convey the idea which this exclamation suggests to the aboriginal mind. Every one who has lived in a mountainous country has observed at sunrise the rim of sunlight coming down the mountainside, as the sun was rising in the opposite direction. This is the Shoshoni "Ee-dah-how." It can only occur in and among the mountains which is represented by the English thought, "the lofty mountains upon which the morning breaks." Also it can occur only at those times when the atmosphere is still, clear and bright, elements producing that invigorating and exhilarating feeling which only high mountainous countries possess.

In the imagination this sunlight on the mountainside can be interpreted to mean "Sunshine Mountain," or "Shining Mountain," and the rim of sunlight can also represent the "Diadem on the Mountain," while a peculiar sunlit peak could be imagined a "Sun-Crowned Peak," or a brilliant display of sunlight upon a snow-capped mountain where the rays of sunshine are

refracted into their natural colors may convey to us the thought or image of the "Gem of the Mountains"; but when the word is uttered in a Shoshoni camp, at early dawn, the hearer knows that a rim of sunlight is coming down the mountainside as the sun is rising in the opposite direction, and that it is time for him to be up and at the labors of the day; just as much so as a person hearing the English expression, "It's sun up," knows that the sun has risen in the sky and he should be up and at work.

The idea conveyed by "Ee-dah-how" may be a kind of sun worship as contended by some, but it appears to me to be no more so than is the English expression, "It's sun up." This exclamation expresses to the primeval mind a confidence in the continuance of nature, for the sun has returned to replenish all things, and this display on the mountainside is the evidence; and to the Indian mind this exhibition of an eternal sun making its first appearance upon an everlasting mountain denotes a stableness worthy of his attention and is his signal to arise, as he habitually does at the first appearance of "Ee-dah-how."

The effect which day and night might have had upon the habits of primitive man is a subject within the province of the anthropologist. However, we are informed that civilized man is oftentimes influenced by custom survivals and will, long after the necessary fact for a certain action has ceased, continue to act as if it were still in existence. Whatever might have been the reason, in times past, we know and realize that the expression, "It's sun up," has a meaning to the majority of mankind of an influence which the rising sun has upon his actions. The emphasis in this expression, "Ee-dah-how," is placed upon the "Dah" syllable, as it is the keynote to the utterance, for the eternal sun arrayed upon the everlasting mountain is the splendor for which **the speaker wishes** to especially impress upon his hearer. The Indian has a name for sunrise, sunset, morning and evening, but "Ee-dah-how" conveys the idea of a beginning or renewal of natural phenomena and the sunrise is the

symbol, while other parts of the day follow in sequence only and do not attract the same attention, sentiment or acknowledgment.

The Shoshonean Indians were the third family, in the extent of territory occupied, of the fifty-five that formerly inhabited the United States. The Shoshoni are one tribe of this great Shoshonean family of which the Comanche are another. The two tribes speak almost the same language, varying only in dialect; their traditions are very similar and they readily converse with and understand each other. Ethnologists consider the Comanche an offshoot of the Shoshoni. It was not many years ago, geologically considered, when they lived adjacent to each other in Southern Wyoming, from which place the Shoshoni were gradually beaten back by other Indians into the mountains, while the Comanche were forced southward. So that the first rush of miners to Pike's Peak in 1858 and what afterwards became known as Colorado, found this tribe within this territory and located especially along the Arkansas river. The country was at that time a part of Kansas. Here, also, they came in contact with the "lofty mountains upon which the morning breaks," which were quite numerous and in commanding evidence. As all the elements were present, it was no wonder that they found the expression, "Ee-dah-how," a familiar one in this new Eldorado, and the word "Idaho" was known to almost every one and was said by all who had any knowledge of it, to mean "Gem of the Mountains." The first permanent settlement made by those hardy pioneers in this new territory in 1859 was named for this Shoshoni word and called "Idaho Springs." In 1861, when Congress organized this new territory, "Idaho" was proposed as its name which should have been applied to it, but the Spanish word "Colorado," which referred to a river and country foreign to this new country and which had no application whatever, was selected instead. This selection was suggested by Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, who was afterwards Vice-President associated with General Grant in the Presidency, and

who was chiefly responsible for the naming of Colorado, Idaho and Montana.

The next heard of this word was when "Idahoe" was applied to a steamboat launched at Victoria, B. C., in the fall of 1860. It was built for the Yale Steamboat company to run upon the Fraser river, and was so called by one of the owners for his former home in Colorado, "Idaho Springs," which was an Indian word signifying "Gem of the Mountains," but the name of the steamboat was soon changed to "Fort Yale," and it was afterwards blown up by a boiler explosion.

The permanent settlement of Idaho territory began with the discovery of gold at Pierce City, on Oro Fino creek, in 1860. It was then a part of Washington Territory and the name "Idaho" was not known or applied at that time. The rush to these mines was made principally by the Columbia river route and so extensive did the traffic, carried on by river boats, become that a company was formed called the Oregon Steam Navigation company, of which Colonel J. S. Ruckel was a stockholder. One of the steamboats constructed by this company,, plying on the Columbia river, was called the "Idaho," and launched in 1860. Mr. George H. Himes, curator of the Oregon Historical Society, informs me that he heard Col. Ruckel tell Mr. D. C. Ireland, who was the local newsgatherer of the "*Oregonian*," in answer to the question as to the origin and meaning of the name "Idaho," which he had applied to this steamboat, "That it was an Indian word meaning 'Gem of the Mountains,' and that he got it from a Colorado friend who was interested with him in mining operations in that state, and he thought the name very appropriate for a steamboat that ran on a river like the Columbia which penetrated a range of mountains like the Cascades." Thus the name became transferred to the great Northwest, and as Joaquin Miller said, "The name was familiar in 5,000 men's mouths as they wallowed through the snow in '61 on their way to the Oro Fino mines."

However, the word became corrupted by these miners into

"Idao," but happily through the writings of the poet, Joaquin Miller, the bard of the Sierras, the proper orthography was restored and for the first time in history an attempt was made to give the origin and meaning of this name and to publish it to the public. Mr. Miller said, "I was riding pony express at the time rumors reached us through the Nez Perce Indians that gold was to be found on the headwaters and tributaries of the Salmon river. I had lived with the Indians and Col. Craig, who had spent most of his life with them, often talked with me about possible discoveries in the mountains to the right, as we rode to Oro Fino, and of what the Indians said of the then unknown region. Gallop your horse, as I have a hundred times, against the rising sun. As you climb the Sweetwater mountains, far away to your right, you will see the name Idaho written on the mountain top, at least, you will see a peculiar and beautiful light at sunrise, a sort of diadem on two grand clusters of mountains that bear away under the clouds fifty miles distant. I called Col. Craig's attention to this peculiar and beautiful light. 'That,' said he, 'is what the Indians call E-dah-hoe, which means the light or diadem on the line of the mountains.' That was the first time I ever heard the name. Later, in September, '61, when I rode into the newly discovered camp to establish an express office, I took with me an Indian from Lapwai. We followed an Indian trail, crossed Craig mountain, then Camas Prairie, and had all the time E-dah-hoe Mount for our objective point. On my return to Lewiston I wrote a letter containing a brief account of our trip and of the mines, and it was published in one of the Oregon papers, which one I have now forgotten. In that account I often mentioned E-dah-hoe, but spelt it Idaho, leaving the pronunciation unmarked by any diacritical signs. So that perhaps I may have been the first to give it its present spelling, but I certainly did not originate the word."

In 1858 the territorial legislature of Washington created a county within this territory which contained all lands north of the Clearwater, east of the Columbia and west of the Rocky

mountains. It was named Shoshone for the largest tribe of Indians in this section of the country, and in 1861, when the population in the mines demanded it, another county was formed including all lands lying south and west of the Clearwater and named Nez Perce for the next largest tribe of Idaho Indians. The rest of the Idaho territory was formed, in 1862, into the largest county ever created within the state, embracing all lands lying south of Nez Perce and east of Snake river and called Idaho county in recognition of this word. In 1863, Boise county was created, so that Idaho had four counties in existence, formed by the Washington legislature, when the territory was organized.

Hon. John Hailey, Idaho's state historian, in his "History of Idaho," says, "The organic act passed by Congress and approved by the President March 3, 1863, creating and organizing a territorial government for the people residing within and those who might come hereafter, in certain limits and boundary lines of territorial lands, gave to that territory the name Idaho. Various reasons are given for the origin of the name Idaho. By some it is claimed that it is an Indian name. One story is that some miners had camped within sight of what is now Mount Idaho. In the morning they were awakened by the Indians calling 'I-da-ho' and pointing to the rising sun just coming over the mountain, hence the term 'The Rising Sun.' Another is that the name was taken from a steamboat built by the late Col. J. S. Ruckel to run on the Columbia river in the early days. This boat was named The Idaho. W. A. Goulder, one of the oldest living (now dead) pioneers of Idaho, saw this steamer on the Columbia in 1860 and noticing the name asked the meaning and was informed that it was an Indian word, 'E-dah-hoe,' and stood for 'The Gem of the Mountains.' Frederick Campbell, one of the pioneers of the Pike's Peak excitement, says that the word Idaho is an Arapaho Indian word and that in Colorado a spring was named Idaho before the word was known in the Northwest, and that it was even suggested for the name of Colorado."

Col. William H. Wallace was delegate in Congress from Washington territory when the bill was passed in 1863, organizing, from the eastern portion of Washington, a new territory, which was named Idaho. Mrs. Wallace was in Washington, D. C., at the time and her account of the episode, which was afterwards published in the *Tacoma Ledger*, is as follows: "I may refer with pride to my connection with the establishment of the territory of Idaho, at the expiring days of the session of Congress, 1862-3. Quite a delegation was present at Washington city who favored the division of Washington territory, which then included all of Idaho and Montana west of the Rocky mountains, extending as far south as the northern line of California and Nevada. It was an immense region and contained South Pass, the great entrance of Oregon, Washington and California, by the great immigrant route. The Colonel was overjoyed at the assured passage of the bill, which he had in charge and his friends who had assembled at his rooms joined with him in conferring upon me the high privilege of naming the new territory. I answered, 'Well, if I am to name it, the territory shall be called Idaho, for my little niece, who was born near Colorado Springs, whose name is Idaho, from an Indian chief's daughter of that name, so called for her beauty, meaning the 'Gem of the Mountains.' Dr. Anson G. Henry, the surveyor-general of Washington territory, then on a visit to Washington City, was in the room. He clapped his hands upon his knees and said to me, 'Mrs. Wallace, Idaho it shall be.' The evening of the day upon which the bill was passed my husband came home and said, "Well, Lue, you've got your territory, and I'm to be governor of it.' A short time after the bill was signed my husband was appointed its first governor, and at the first election held in the newly organized territory, he was selected delegate to Congress."

There were others beside Mrs. Wallace who claimed the honor of naming Idaho territory, and while their contributory suggestions may have had some influence in designating it, yet the true history of the application of the word to this particu-

lar geographical territory for political administration discloses the fact that it occurred in an ordinary way and that instead of any sentiment influencing the act, it was simply a result of legislative enactment. In the fall of 1861, Wallace, Garfield and Lander were candidates for Congressional delegate from Washington territory and while stumping the country during the campaign met at Pierce city. The people inhabiting this section of the country were so far from Olympia, the capital, and had for some time agitated a division of the eastern part of Washington territory; so through the solicitation and request of these people each of these candidates agreed that whoever was elected would favor this division and every one agreed that "Idaho" should be the name of the new territory. That this agreement was carried out is proven by the fact that Mr. Wallace, the successful candidate, at once had introduced in Congress a bill creating the new territory of Idaho.

The Congressional history of this act shows that in the committee to which the bill had been referred three names were suggested, namely, Shoshone, Montana and Idaho, and that in the bill as it passed the House of Representatives the name of "Montana" was applied to this new territory. When the matter came before the Senate for consideration, the bill was modified very materially, for while it scarcely included what is now Idaho, the modified bill included all of the present states of Montana and Wyoming, in which form it was approved and became the law. Later these states were created out of Idaho. Senator Wilson moved to strike out the word "Montana" and insert "Idaho" in its stead. To this Senator Harding of Oregon agreed, saying, "Idaho in English means 'Gem of the Mountains'." Senator Wilson's amendment was agreed to and when the bill went back to the House it was concurred in and the new territory was henceforth designated Idaho.

Thus Senator Wilson selected the name Idaho, whilst Senator Harding was instrumental in continuing its meaning.

How the Shoshoni Indian word "Ee-dah-how" was eventually transformed into the English word "Idaho" is a task for the etymologist; but, whatever may be its etymology, the word "Idaho" and its meaning, "Gem of the Mountains," are forever fixed as correlated terms in the vocabulary of the people of Idaho.

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